CASE CLASSIFICATION IN COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY

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In the past two decades, probation and parole agencies across the U.S. have responded to changes in client population and criticisms of ineffectiveness (see, for example, Petersilia et al., 1985) by increasing their use of, and reliance upon, case classification technologies. Most case classification systems in use today rely on the quantification of risk factors and service needs to produce risk and need scores that determine levels of supervision. There is widespread interest among probation and parole officials in classification instruments and comparisons of their relative utility. Unfortunately, there are no readily available data that describe the current "state of the art" of case classification in probation and parole.

Under a grant from the National Institute of Justice, the University of Cincinnati is in the process of attempting to address this gap by surveying all U.S. probation and parole agencies to determine the current state of case classification. This article presents some of our preliminary findings with regard to the importance of case classification and the instruments currently being used by probation and parole agencies throughout the country.

Background of Case Classification

There is a general consensus in the literature that probation and parole supervision and management have changed in the past 20 years as a result of the development offender risk and needs assessment technology. As Harris and Smith (1996:219) put it, "A major re-engineering of probation has occurred through the proliferation of risk and needs assessment tools. This innovation . . . has enabled probation managers to adjust caseloads so that offenders who present the highest risk to public safety receive the greatest amount of attention." Moreover, case classification helps departments defend supervision decisions and justify sending offenders to outside service agencies. The spread of risk/needs assessment in community supervision is the result of a variety of forces, so that today, the majority of probation agencies use some sort of risk/needs classification system (McShane and Krause, 1993).

Growing out of earlier work designed to assist parole decision-makers with release decisions, the technology of risk assessment was rather quickly adapted to case classification and assignment to supervision levels in probation and parole (Travis, 1990; Schneider et al., 1996; Clear and Gallagher, 1985). Perhaps the most important impetus for the widespread adoption of case classification in probation and parole was the model Risk Classification initiative undertaken by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) in the early 1980s (NIC, 1981; Travis, 1990). Through

this initiative, NIC provided training and technical assistance to probation and parole agencies nationwide in the implementation of case classification systems.

The Risk Classification model used both risk assessment and needs assessment instruments to classify cases into one of three levels of community supervision. The "need" portion of the assessment was not diagnostic in nature but was designed to assess the extent to which problems existed in a case, to better determine the amount of time that would be required in providing supervision. In tandem with the Wisconsin risk and need instruments, the NIC model used the Client Management Classification tool (CMC), comprising a structured interview, to help staff determine the best intervention strategy for working with an offender. The Risk Classification model coupled the use of these instruments with an information system for allocating staff workload. The model included periodic reassessments and procedures for developing supervision plans based on the offender's risk and needs (Baird et al., 1979; Lerner et al., 1986).

Case classification promised more fair, rational, and effective use of community supervision resources. For example, Vito and Marshall (1983) reported on how a federal probation office used case classification to implement an "administrative caseload" of low-risk and low-need offenders who did not require the investment of significant supervision resources. Officer time diverted from these cases was used to provide more intensive surveillance and service to offenders posing higher levels of risk and service need.

Critics of risk and needs assessment noted the potential for quantitative scoring and automatic, if not automated, decision-making to supplant professional judgment and the "human" element of community supervision (Schneider et al., 1996; Clear and Byrne, 1992; Travis, 1990). Others have argued that the instruments are nothing more than "educated guesses" (Smykla, 1986: 127). Nonetheless, interest in risk and needs assessment and "objective" case classification remains high. Contemporary observers note that effective classification processes are required for the design and delivery of effective correctional interventions (Bonta, 1996; Jones, 1996; DeComo et al., 1995; Keiser, 1997; Carey, 1997). Indeed, among Oklahoma probation officers, Schneider and her colleagues (1996) found that those officers who felt themselves to be most effective in supervising clients were also most likely to support quantified risk and needs assessment.

Case Classification Today

Probation and parole agencies across the U.S. are using different types of classification instruments for different purposes. These instruments have been developed through a variety of techniques and based on a number of different populations (Gottfredson, 1987). In addition to risk assessment, there is increased emphasis on what Bonta (1996) calls "third generation" assessments. These assessments combine evaluations of offender risk and criminogenic needs to produce a more complete picture of both the likelihood of recidivism and mechanisms to reduce chances of failure. Bonta identifies the two best-known "third generation" assessments as the CMC and the Level of Services Inventory (LSI). Both are intended to improve correctional practice by focusing attention on important characteristics of offenders. The CMC is designed principally to influence and control agency operations in probation and parole, while the LSI is aimed at addressing offender behavior by identifying the criminogenic forces at work in the offender's life.

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The original CMC, as used within the Risk Classification model, was supplemented by separate risk and needs assessments and coupled with a case planning process for probation and parole officers; case plans for treatment interventions came primarily from the CMC component. A later adaptation of the CMC, called Strategies for Case Supervision, added a lengthy semi-structured interview and produces an offender typology relevant to supervision strategies (Baird and Neuenfeldt, 1990). The LSI also uses a semi-structured interview to assess static and dynamic characteristics, but it produces a single "risk" score, with sub-components of the total being indicative of areas in which intervention can reduce risk.

Clear and O'Leary (1982) and the NIC Model Risk Classification system have suggested that combined risk and needs classification can be used to improve practice by individual officers, inform agency management and administration, and facilitate evaluation and development efforts. That is, uniform classification can not only sort offenders into different categories relevant to supervision practice, but classification scores can be used to describe the client population, quantify resource needs, allocate resources, and assess the effectiveness of community supervision.

Preliminary Findings of the Current Study
In order to better understand the use of classification instruments, we surveyed all U.S. probation and parole agencies that have jurisdiction over adult offenders. In states with "state systems," one questionnaire was sent asking about "state" practices. In states with county systems or both state and county systems, a questionnaire was sent to each of the jurisdictions. The questionnaire asked about the use of classification and assessment instruments including training needs, cost, time involved, and reasons for using or not using such tools.

Questions were posed in three sections:

■ Section I asked about general characteristics of the agency, such as population served and number of staff.

■ Section II asked questions concerning the importance of case classification.

■ Section III, completed only by agencies that use standardized, objective case classification procedures or plan to use them in the near future, asked about current case classification procedures and likely future practices.

The results from our survey are still being processed and may change once our final report is issued. However, we do have some preliminary results that shed some light on current classification practices.

Perceived importance of objective classification. Part of the information requested concerned the importance of case classification on risk and need. Respondents were asked on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not necessary at all and 10 being absolutely necessary, "how important is it to use standardized, objective instruments to classify offenders on the following dimensions?" Results are presented in Figure 1, page 7.

■ With regard to classification on risk, 79.6 percent circled 7 or higher. That is, almost 80 percent agreed that classifying offenders on risk using standardized, objective instruments is "very important." It is interesting to note that fully 36.2 percent of respondents circled 10 ("absolutely necessary").

Figure 1. Importance of Using Standardized, Objective Instruments to Classifying on Risk and Need
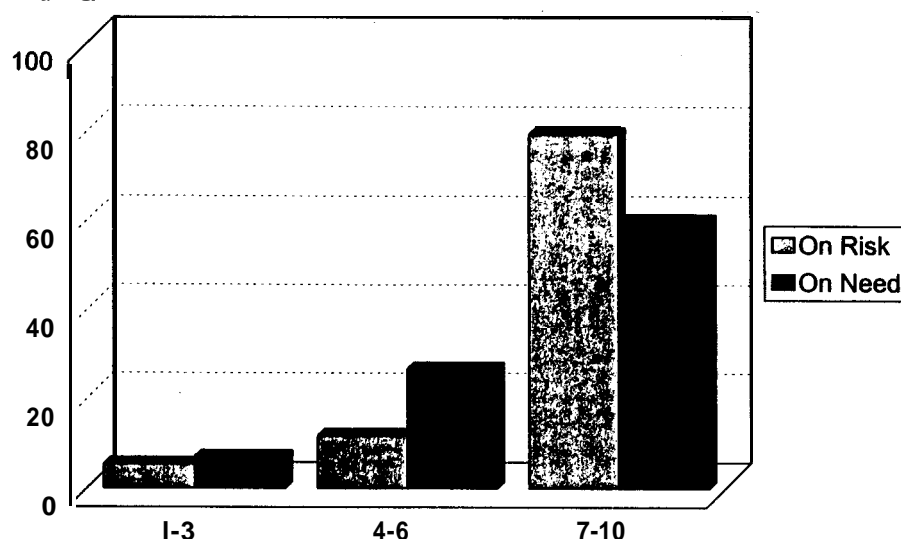
Respondents were asked "How important is it to use standardized, objective instruments to classify offenders on risk and need" using a Likert Scale with 1 =Not Necessary at All and 1O=Absolutely Necessary

- With regard to classification on need, 60 percent of respondents circled 7 or higher. For this dimension, 20 percent circled 10, agreeing that it is "absolutely necessary" to classify offenders on need using standardized, objective instruments.

- The average score was 7.23, indicating strong support for using standardized and objective instruments for assessing risk and need.

Use of objective instruments. Figure 2, page 8, illustrates whether agencies currently use or plan to use standardized, objective instruments to classify offenders:
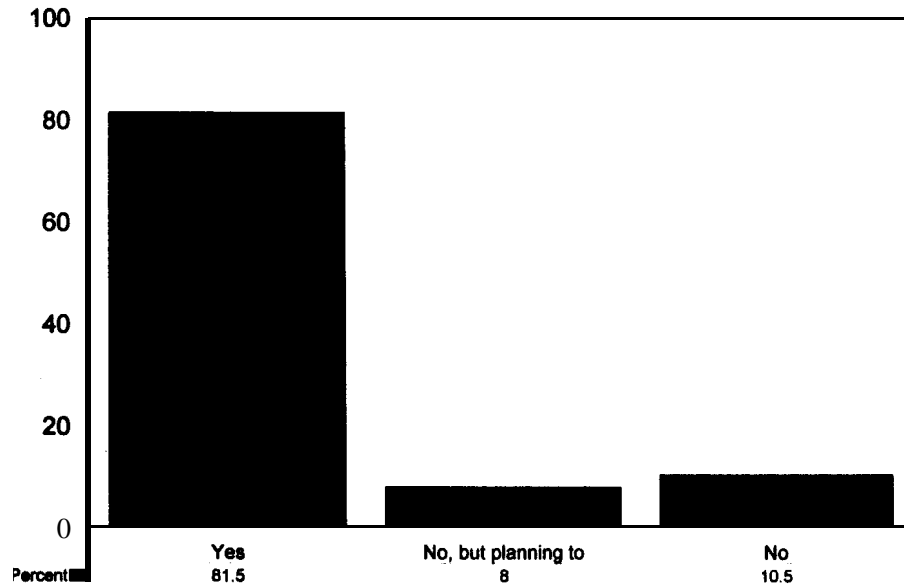
- Slightly over 81 percent of the agencies that have returned the survey to date claim to currently use standardized, objective case classification procedures.

- About 10 percent do not currently use these assessments but plan to do so.

- The remaining 9 percent do not use any instruments for classification and do not plan to use them.

Agencies that do not use standardized, objective instruments and do not plan to use them were asked for their reasons. Respondents were allowed to indicate more than one reason. Results are presented in Figure 3, page 8. The most common reason is that agencies are "too busy and there is not enough time" (60 percent); second is the belief that a "professional opinion is adequate" (35 percent). Twenty-five (25) percent of the respondents claimed that case classification is "too costly." Ten (10) percent stated that it would "add too much paperwork," and 5 percent said it would be "too hard to change what we do now."
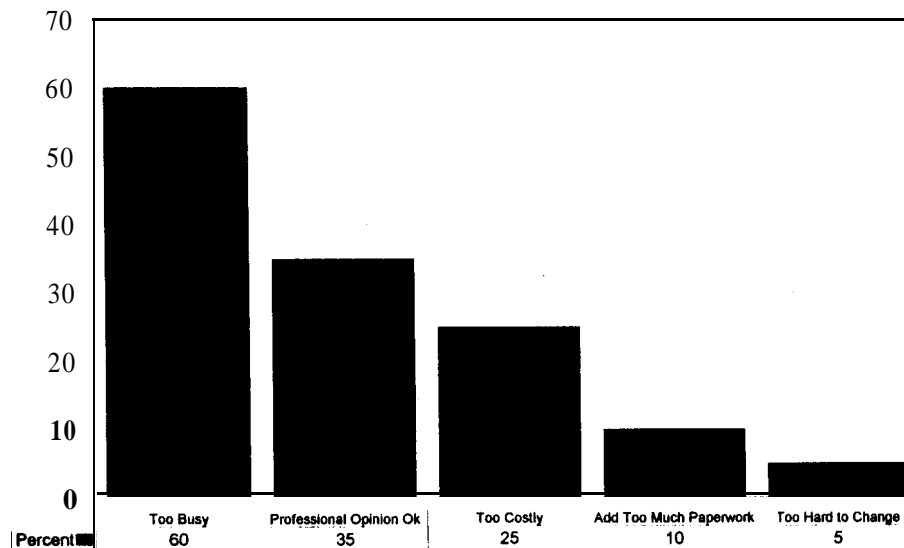
The survey also collected data on the prevalence of several classification systems nationwide. Preliminary findings are shown in Figure 4, page 9.

- Instruments introduced via NIC's model Risk Classification system-the "Wisconsin model"-are still the most widely used. Nearly 27 percent of the

Figure 2. "Does Your Agency Classify Offenders Through the Use of Objective Standardized Instruments?"

	Yes	No, but planning to	No
Percent	81.5	8	10.5

Figure 3. Reason for Not Using Classification Instruments

|	Too Busy	Professional Opinion Ok	Too Costly	Add Too Much Paperwork	Too Hard to Change
Percent	60	35	25	10	5

Respondents could check more than one reason.

respondents indicated that they use the Wisconsin Risk instrument (or some varia-
tion); 21 percent use the Wisconsin Need instrument.

- About 25 percent use the CMC.

- The LSI is used by nearly 14 percent of U.S. probation and parole agencies, with
  another 5.7 percent making plans to implement it.

- The remaining 13 percent use a variety of other tools.

Figure 4. What Instrument Is Currently Used?

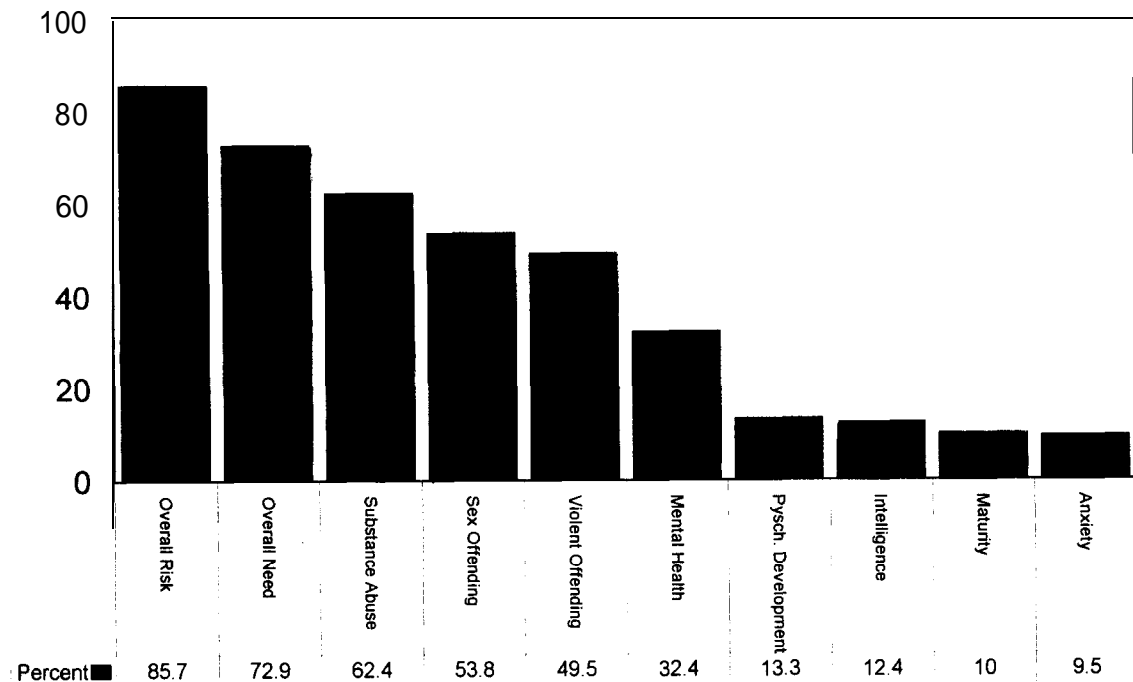|	Wisconsin Risk 26.7	Wisconsin Need 21	CMC 24.3	LSI 13.8	Other Instruments 21.9
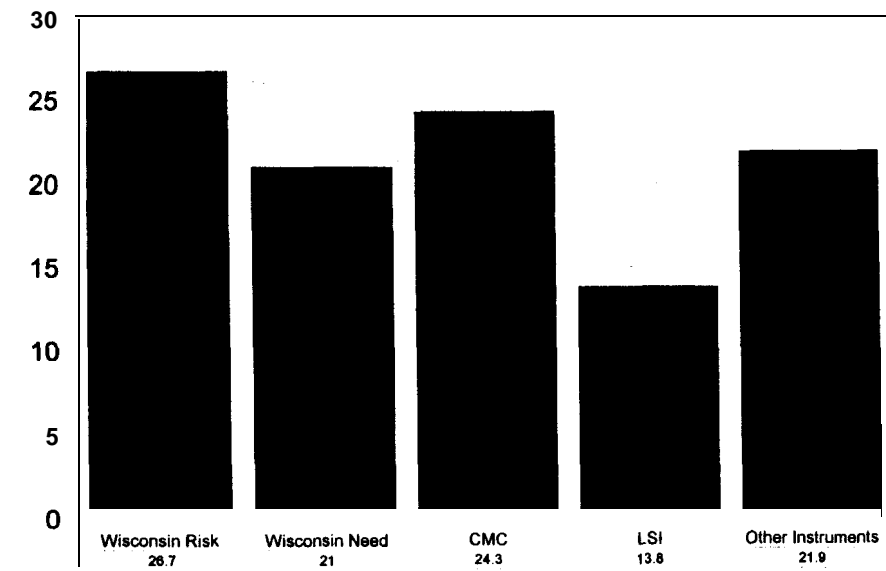
Some agencies use more than one instrument, thus total exceed 100%

   Finally, we asked those respondents who use classification tools to list the factors on which they classify offenders. These data are presented in Figure 5.

- A majority of agencies classify on overall risk and needs, substance abuse, and sexual offending.

- Almost half examine violent offending, followed by mental heath (32.4 percent), psychological development (13.3 percent), intelligence (12.4 percent), maturity (10 percent), and anxiety (9.5 percent).

Figure 5. What Factors Do Agencies Classify On?

	Overall Risk	Overall Need	Substance Abuse	Sex Offending	Violent Offending	Mental Health	Pysch. Development	Intelligence	Maturity	Anxiety
Percent	85.7	72.9	62.4	53.8	49.5	32.4	13.3	12.4	10	9.5

Respondents could check more than one factor

Early Conclusions

Classification and assessment are important to probation and parole agencies for a number of reasons. They guide decision-making, reduce bias, improve placement of offenders, help manage resources in a more effective manner, and can aid in legal challenges (Latessa, 1999). These preliminary findings seem to indicate that most probation and parole agencies recognize the value and utility of standardized and objective classification tools.

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